

VU Research Portal

A Reply to John W. Fuesen and Tad Guzie

de Ruyter, D.J.

published in
Interchange
1999

document version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in VU Research Portal](#)

citation for published version (APA)

de Ruyter, D. J. (1999). A Reply to John W. Fuesen and Tad Guzie. *Interchange*, 30(2), 247-254.

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal ?

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

E-mail address:
vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl

A Reply to John W. Friesen and Tad Guzie

DORET DE RUYTER
Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

I had written the article 'Christian Schools in a Pluralistic Society?' about two years ago. When I started to write this reply I was therefore not only inspired to respond to two interesting comments, but also to investigate whether I still hold the position I took then as well as the arguments I gave for that position. Fortunately, reading my article was not an estranging experience. I still defend the central ideas as well as the arguments given for it. In my article I tried to examine whether it is possible to give a defence for Christian education and Christian schools. My basic premise was that Christian parents – and for that matter all parents who endorse a specific religion – want to send their children to schools where the orientation towards religion, life, and education is as similar as possible to their own. As I have stated, Christian parents, as well as Islamic, Hindu, or Jewish parents, in the Netherlands have a constitutional right to send their children to specific denominational schools. This right was already a constitutional right at the end of the last century, but it became an effective right for all parents when in 1920 the government ruled that all schools should be financed equally. Until about 1960 hardly any questions were raised on the validity of this system. Christianity was dominant in the Netherlands and the different denominations each had their own school. In the last three decades, however, our society has changed into a pluralistic and secular society and it can be questioned whether in such a society Christian schools can be as easily defended or not. The fact that many people in our society write about our school system and openly question its defensibility makes it clear that the freedom-right is not taken for granted any longer. In my article I come to the conclusion that it is indeed still defensible. I have to add, in response to Friesen, that I have not tried to defend my own ideas about Christian education or Christian schools. This is for instance evident from the fact that I consider myself to be a highly liberal Protestant, whereas I come to the conclusion that orthodox Christian schools are defensible as well, given certain restrictions.

I will begin this reply with a response to four questions and comments of both Guzie and Friesen on spirituality and religious education. I will follow with Friesen's comment on critical thinking, which brings me also to his point that my article is not as generous as it seems.

Spirituality and Religious Education

Guzie hopes that Holland has some advice to offer about the professional education of teachers. I do not know whether we are in the position to give advice, because though the Dutch case is an interesting example it is not as flourishing as it sometimes seems. As said, we have had a system of completely subsidized schools for about a century now and this has grown into an enormous number of different kinds of religious schools, ranging from Jewish, Islamic to orthodox, liberal Hindu, and even Transcendental Meditation. But we have experienced the same erosion in the religious impact of the school as Guzie describes in Canada. We have even got a name for this erosion. We call it 'fading in colour.' Many secondary schools have problems in living up to their Christian identity because they have become big school communities with pupils and teachers from a range of backgrounds. In some of these schools more than 50% of the pupils and the teachers do not consider themselves to be Christians. Primary Christian schools in the cities fade in colour for the same but also for a different reason. Some of these have more Islamic than Christian pupils. Many Islamic parents want to send their children to Christian schools, because these are religious schools. But these schools are then confronted with questions about their religious identity. Should they for instance also offer the opportunity for education into Islam? On the other hand, there is also a growth in orthodox Protestant schools. These schools have been thriving quite well in the last decade, ascribed to the fact that many less outspoken Christian schools have indeed faded in colour, so that parents who are on the more conservative side of the Protestant church send their children to these schools.

Mainstream Christian schools as well as the mainstream Christian teachers colleges differ enormously. To some the Canadian characterization is more correct, whereas in others the way religion is practised is more like in the American religious schools. However, in all schools, public as well as denominational, teachers have to teach the pupils about the major religions. I think this is one of the benefits of the decline of the influence of Christianity and the increase of people having other beliefs in the Netherlands. All pupils who leave primary schools in the Netherlands at

least have to have heard about Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, and Islam. But the way in which this subject is taught is left to the schools. Of course, teachers have to learn about the major religions themselves. This is therefore an obligatory subject in teachers colleges. But I am not sure that the way in which this subject is taught in the colleges meets the expectations of Guzie. We again notice in our society a growing interest in spirituality. Church membership has rapidly declined and the Netherlands is called the most secularised society in Europe. But people again start to recognize themselves as religious persons, though not as members of a specific church. The Netherlands seems to have needed a period free of the constraints of the specific denominational pillars¹ in which people were more or less locked up. Emancipation of Roman Catholics and Protestants has broken down the tight boundaries. Spirituality and belief has changed from a prescribed belief by the church into a quest of individual persons.

Friesen states that I fail to distinguish between spirituality and religion. I agree, and given his description of spirituality, I would have to correct my opinion that religious content should be included in the primary grades because religion gives meaning to life (see Friesen). What I want to claim is that children should be offered spiritual horizons (in addition to the moral horizons described by Taylor, 1992), but I think I fall short in understanding how telling children about the "myriad of interpretations about the metaphysical workings of the universe" can be done without offering children religious examples of these interpretations. In Christian schools this interpretation will be from the Christian faith and might include specific creeds and doctrines (though it is not always clear how doctrines contribute to one's understanding of the meaning of life). Schools who do not want to offer a specific religion or schools who are legally prohibited to do so, for instance the public schools in the United States, can still offer spiritual horizons, but they have to do so in another way than Christian schools or other religious schools will do. Non-influential teaching is impossible, as Friesen rightly states. So public schools have to be aware of their influence and can use it to offer children answers to the meaning of life. These schools can offer spiritual horizons actively without presenting one of those as the best and trying to convince the children of the same. They can also take the stance that offering spiritual horizons in an active way is not their task, but that they are willing to offer the time and space to pupils to practise their faith in school without passing judgement on these religions.

Friesen describes the attitude of liberal Christian parents as a hidden certainty that "even a highly-critical assessment of Christianity will result

in personal commitment to God." I do not think that this is a correct description. At least, this is not the way I wanted to portray their stance against the religious education of their children. What I think is most characteristic of liberal Christian parents is that they want to combine two aims in the education of their children. On the one hand they educate their children into the religion they themselves believe in, and of course hope that their children will come to share this belief. But on the other hand they also strive for the aim of autonomy, which for them implies that they can only set their hopes on the autonomous choices of their children. They are not certain that their children will share their beliefs, but they are not willing to take the measures by which this certainty might be extended, for instance by installing fear in their children or giving an unjust portrait of other religions. This seems to be an unintelligible position, because if the parents deeply hope that their children will become believers as themselves, why should they not use all their powers to do so? But as Thiessen (1993) shows in his book *Teaching for Commitment* this is a perfectly compatible and defensible position. It is probably easier to comprehend when we look at the way in which the parents believe. We can say that liberal Christians believe in a fallibilistic way, as I illustrated in my article with a quote from Thiessen. They believe that they are right, but are never sure and might even say that one day they have to face the fact that they have always haunted a ghost, as a famous Protestant theologian in our country states. If one believes in this way one would never want to restrict his children to acquire capacities to examine whether they share the belief or expose it as a ghost. Thus, the attitude of liberal Christian parents is more accurately described as being humble than as being so sure about their belief that they dare to take the risk that their children will not come to the same conclusion as regard to their religion as they, though of course they will never stop hoping for that.

Guzie makes an interesting point about the distinction between teaching *into* and teaching *about*. I think I take the difference between *into* and *about* a bit differently than Guzie. Teaching *about* in my view does not exclude teachers trying to make their students enthusiastic about a subject. Teachers who take their subjects to heart would not even be able to. What would make their teaching *about* a subject, for instance English teaching *into* English, is that is that the teacher's intent is to have the pupils regard reading (real) literature as part of their identity. And it is clearly possible that teachers do strive to achieve this aim. Guzie's other example is the social studies teacher. I want to claim that these teachers should interpret their task more as teaching *into* than teaching *about*.

Teaching *into* a society is the kind of civic education I have in mind. I hope that teachers do not restrict themselves to telling *about* democracy or plurality, but that they try to establish a liberal democratic spirit in their pupils. This makes it more difficult for orthodox Protestant schools to implement civic education in their schools. If civic education were understood as mere teaching *about*, there would be a smaller conflict between this subject and teaching *into* religion.

Critical Thinking and the Generosity of my Defense

Friesen is right about the incongruity of the scope of my article in that it focuses on primary schools, but also advocates the education of critical thinking which is inconceivable for young children, though a starting possibility in the higher grades. I had to restrict my scope, as I state in the introduction of my article. Defending, if possible, Christian secondary schools would take different kinds of arguments and counterarguments. But, I could not leave out the educational aim of critical thinking, as this is important in civic education. And as Friesen later in his reply remarks: critical thinking is not an innate human universal trait. Critical thinking does not come naturally; it has to be educated. Learning to think critically presupposes that a person is still able to question his or her beliefs. This implies that children should not be educated in such a way that their powers are vanished when they reach the age at which they are able to think critically. Indoctrination is therefore unjustified if one takes critical thinking at heart. This certainly has drawbacks for religious education, as for any kind of education. If parents have instilled an irrational fear of other peoples or other beliefs in their children combined with an irrational fear to think about their own belief, we should be quite pessimistic about the possibility of children learning to think critically. And the same is true for primary schools. They also have to teach the children in such a way that the aim of critical thinking is possible to reach. I am more optimistic about the influence of schools than Friesen is. Children attend schools for a substantial time during the day and for quite a long period. Children attend schools in their formative years and schools can, if they want to, attribute not only to their knowledge, but also to their personal lives. However, my argument about teaching critical thinking in schools was not based on optimism, but on the mere fact that the state can only strive for this aim in schools. The state cannot intervene in families where parents indoctrinate their children, unless it is obvious that the child suffers. And it is difficult to prove that this is indeed the case in such families. However, the state has

an interest in children becoming critically thinking civilians, as do other citizens of the state. To ensure this interest the state can use its authority in schools. This point of view implies a division of the educational responsibility between parents and the state, where parents have the greatest say in the education of their children at home and education into a specific conception of the good and the state has a say in the education of children towards citizens of a liberal democracy. This point of view is defended by Amy Gutmann in many of her publications. I endorse her central idea in general, but think her conception of civic education is too demanding. Her ideas and ideals of democratic education can be summarised by the phrase 'conscious social reproduction' and are centred on the notions of non-repression and non-discrimination. Non-repression means that the character and intellect that enables people to choose rationally among different ways of life are cultivated (1989, p. 77). Non-discrimination means that everyone must be educated. No one should be excluded from education towards rational deliberation. Though Gutmann acknowledges that her ideas have consequences for some religious groups, she claims that her theory is not too intrusive: "Liberal democratic virtues cannot be well taught without asking children to reflect on competing political perspectives, which are often associated with different ways of life, but such reflection does not [and should not] entail either moral or metaphysical scepticism" (1995, p. 578). And she concludes "A public commitment to teaching mutual respect does not prevent parents from fostering deep religious beliefs in their children. It only sets principled limits on the authority parents may claim over their children's public education" (p. 577).

Finally, I fully agree with Friesen that my defence is not entirely generous. For some religious groups it is not generous at all. I can conclude that in general I have given a strong defence for religious schools, which many Christian parents can consider as a blessing. Fundamentalist Christian parents and Ultra-orthodox parents are not among those, as I do not believe that teaching children into fundamentalism in schools is a defensible position in a pluralistic liberal democracy. Therefore, Friesen's conclusion that I would claim that the ultra-orthodox Christian school in which civic education is implemented and taken seriously is the very best option is not entirely correct. The very best option is liberal Christian schools, because in such schools there is no incongruity between Christian education and civic education. But orthodox Christian schools are a good option, given the restrictions of the demands of civic education.

However, whether we can demand that orthodox and ultra-orthodox schools implement civic education into their curriculum depends fully on the way in which the religious community or the parents want to participate in society. Friesen states that the Amish interact meaningfully in society. I do not agree with him on this point. I am more convinced by Spinner's (1994) analysis that the Amish do not participate in the American democratic society at all. This is precisely the reason why Amish parents should not be forced to send their children to public high schools, which was ruled in the famous Yoder case and which is normatively defended by Spinner. Because the Amish have no intention of participating in democracy, and because they do not want to use their democratic rights, their children should not be forced to learn to use them. But this kind of life outside democracy is not characteristic for many fundamentalist religious groups. Instead of retreating from the public domain, they try to influence politics and make use of their democratic powers. In this case, the state has to take a different position. When parents want their children to participate in a democratic society in which they use their powers to extend the influence of their fundamentalist belief, they have to accept that this also has a price. A liberal democratic society can flourish only if its citizens reflect the notion that they are all free and equal. In Macedo's words, we are citizens of a liberal democratic society, not subjects of a state. "Political power is our shared property and not something that is wielded over us. Liberal citizenship carries with it not only privileges but also obligations, including the obligation to respect the equal rights of fellow citizens whatever their faiths" (1995, p. 225).

In an article about fundamentalism I have argued that a lesser demanding interpretation of civic education than Gutmann and Macedo offer, who both celebrate the idea of pluralism, that asks for 'mere' tolerance of citizens in a liberal democracy, fundamentalist parents would seem to have to face up to the situation that their children must learn the rights and duties of citizenship in a liberal democracy. The obligation to teach respect for the rights of other believers is not confined to public schools, but is also obligatory in religious schools. Christian schools cannot argue that they are exempted from teaching about other religions because these are not prevalent in the school. This argument is not relevant. The plurality is present in society, which is the reason the state has legitimate educational authority regarding the specific civic education of its children, which means all children.

NOTES

1. From World War I until about 1970 the Dutch society was strongly segregated. This society was called a 'pillarized' society, a metaphor for a society divided into four highly segregated groups, namely Roman Catholics, Protestants, Socialists, and Liberals.

Author's Address:

Cath. Boudewijnshof 77
1064 PG Amsterdam
THE NETHERLANDS

REFERENCES

- Gutmann, A. (1995). Civic education and social diversity. *Ethics*, **105**, 557-579.
- Macedo, S. (1995). Liberal civic education and religious fundamentalism: The case of God v. John Rawls? *Ethics*, **105**, 468-496.
- Spinner, J. (1994). *The boundaries of citizenship. Race, ethnicity, and nationality in the liberal state*. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press.
- Taylor, C. (1992) *The ethics of authenticity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Thiessen, E.J. (1993). *Teaching for commitment. Liberal education, indoctrination and Christian nurture*. Leominster: Gracewing.